region6news

Friday, September 08, 2017

Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, and 66 Tribal Nations

Please note: All articles are available in the attached PDF.
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Hurricane coverage:

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2 — EPA Chief Pledges to Secure Toxic Sites in Irma's Storm Path, Bloomberg, 9/7/2017
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3 — EPA chief says ready to further relax fuel standards due to hurricanes, Reuters, 9/7/2017
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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is preparing for Hurricane Irma's landfall on the U.S. East Coast by securing vulnerable toxic waste sites and easing gasoline standards to ensure steady fuel supplies, its chief told Reuters on Thursday.

4 — Chemical risk database targeted by Congress, Houston Chronicle, 9/7/2017
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6 — What lessons will Houston-area officials learn from Harvey? History gives us a clue, Texas Tribune, 9/8/2017
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As Houston begins to recover from Harvey, a growing chorus of voices is calling for big policy changes to reduce flood damage from future disasters. Local officials haven't said much about what they might pursue, but history offers some clues.

7 — Hurricane Irma downgraded to Category 4 storm, still 'extremely dangerous', New Orleans Times-Picayune, 9/7/17
http://www.nola.com/hurricane/index.ssf/2017/09/hurricane_irma_category_4.html#incart_2box

Hurricane Irma was downgraded to a Category 4 storm early Friday morning (Sept. 8), according to the National Hurricane Center. However, forecasters said the storm remains "dangerous" and "extremely powerful."

8 — Hurricanes Are Sweeping The Atlantic. What's The Role Of Climate Change?, NPR, 9/8/17
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9 — Researchers warn of high bacteria levels in Clear Lake floodwaters, Houston Chronicle, 9/7/17
http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Researchers-warn-of-high-bacteria-levels-in-Clear-12181528.php
University of Houston-Clear Lake researchers have found staggering levels of dangerous E. coli and other fecal bacteria in Hurricane Harvey floodwaters in the Clear Lake watershed.

Other news:

10 — Air quality standard looms large for San Antonio, San Antonio Business Journal, 9/8/17
https://www.bizjournals.com/sanantonio/news/2017/09/07/air-quality-standards-deadline-looms-large-for-san.html
All eyes are on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as an important deadline approaches to enact new air quality standards for San Antonio and other cities. And the Trump administration may play a wild card, the state's top air quality regulator said.

11 — Power plant rule repeal announcement likely this fall: EPA, The Hill, 9/7/17
http://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/349679-power-plant-rule-repeal-announcement-likely-this-fall-epa
Federal officials expect to finalize their review of the Obama administration's climate rule for power plans this fall, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said Thursday in a court filing.

12 — Monsanto says Arkansas plant board distorts dicamba, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, 9/7/17
http://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2017/sep/08/monsanto-says-state-distorts-dicamba-20/
Monsanto on Thursday criticized the state Plant Board, the work of weed scientists and a task force of volunteers that recently recommended that dicamba herbicides be banned for in-crop use next year.

13 — Water testing continues in Carrizozo after sulfate alarm, Ruidoso (NM) News, 9/7/17
http://www.ruidosonews.com/story/news/local/community/2017/09/07/water-testing-continues-carrizozo-after-sulfate-alarm/642868001/
Testing of water in the Carrizozo community system for high levels of sulfates continued this week, but the mayor said records from 1996, indicate sulfates were a problem 20 years ago. The difference was that back then, the high level was mitigated by the mixing of water from the Bonito River.

14 — Update: Medford earthquake upgraded to 4.3 magnitude, Tulsa World, 9/8/17
http://www.tulsaworld.com/earthquakes/update-medford-earthquake-upgraded-to-magnitude/article_7639de67-85c1-59ab-b466-095fdf7ec734.html
National geologists upgraded a Thursday evening earthquake from 3.9 to 4.3 magnitude. The USGS recorded the earthquake about 9:26 p.m. in Grant County, Oklahoma. The temblor struck about 9 miles south-southeast of Medford at a depth of about 3 miles, according to the USGS. The quake was widely felt in Tulsa and as far north as Wichita. Residents near the epicenter reported light to moderate shaking.

15 — OPINION: Flood Control 101: Don't pave over the storm drains, New Orleans Times-Picayune, 9/7/17
http://www.nola.com/opinions/index.ssf/2017/09/new_orleans_flood_storm_drains.html#incart_river_index
I think I would spot the problem with paving over storm drains and catch basins. But that's apparently what was allowed to happen along some Uptown streets as the Army Corps of Engineers worked to complete -- get this -- major federal drainage projects. Times-Picayune reporter Richard Rainey reports that the news, made public Thursday by Councilman Jason Williams, left "city officials scrambling to cast blame and discover who must clean them up."

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Residents cough, rub eyes in Harvey pollution spike

By FRANK BAJAK AND MICHELLE MINKOFF, ASSOCIATED PRESS
GALENA PARK, Texas — Sep 8, 2017, 9:05 AM ET

The Associated Press

COMING UP | Meet the Good Samaritans helping their neighbors in the aftermath of Harvey

Cindy Sanchez began to feel ill while barbecuing just before Harvey's torrents started pelting this city just east of Houston, along a corridor with the nation's highest concentration of petrochemical plants.

"I started getting really, really bad headaches," said Sanchez, a 32-year-old housewife. "I never get headaches."

"My husband's eyes were burning," she said. "He actually had a napkin that was wet over his eyes." The sewage-like stench chased the couple indoors and Sanchez, sick to her stomach, lay down.

People complained of headaches, nausea, itchy skin and throats — classic symptoms of industrial chemical exposure — as plants and refineries raced to burn off compounds that could combust in extreme weather or power loss.

Petrochemical corridor residents say air that is bad enough on normal days got worse as Harvey crashed into the nation's fourth-largest city and then yielded the highest ozone pollution so far this year anywhere in Texas. The Houston metro area was ranked 12th in the nation for worst ozone pollution by The American Lung Association this year, although its air was better than the Los Angeles and New York regions.

Plants owned by Shell, Chevron, Exxon-Mobil and other industry giants reported more than 1.5 million pounds (680 metric tons) of extraordinary emissions over eight days beginning Aug. 23 to the Texas Commission of Environmental Quality in Harris County, which encompasses Houston. That amounted to 61 percent of this year's largely unpermitted emissions for the county and five times the amount released in the same period in 2016. Of the known carcinogens released during Harvey, more than 13 tons were benzene. Inhaling it can cause dizziness and even unconsciousness and long-term exposure can trigger leukemia.

Asked about the health effects of the dramatic emissions spike, state environmental commission spokeswoman Andrea Morrow said "all measured concentrations were well below levels of health concern" and "local residents should not be concerned about air quality issues related to the effects of the storm." The federal Environmental Protection Agencyissued a similar statement.

Yet most air monitors were knocked out or offline during Harvey's wrath, making measurement difficult.

Texas sets fines low for industrial polluters— at $25,000 per day for federal clean air violations. Big plants tend to delay shutdowns for as long as possible when a hurricane is coming — then restart quickly afterward — triggering another spike in unhealthy emissions, said Daniel Cohan, a Rice University environmental scientist.

"These (plants) are three and four decades old, beasts that are meant to operate all the time."

Asked if emissions could have been reduced by winding down plant operations sooner, American Petroleum Institute spokesman Reid Porter said: "We are still gathering information and making assessments."

Some emissions were triggered by the sheer volume of Harvey's deluge.

At an Arkema Inc. plant about 25 miles (40 kilometers) northeast of downtown Houston, organic peroxides rendered unstable by lost refrigeration exploded in flames and cast an acrid plume. At least 18 tons burned after people within a 1.5-mile (2.4-kilometer) radius were evacuated. On Thursday, seven sheriff's deputies and emergency medical responders sued Arkema in state court for gross negligence, claiming fumes from the incident made them vomit and gasp for air.

Benzene and other toxins spilled into the air outside the Valero Partners refinery on Houston's east side, as heavy rains damaged a tank's floating roof and invaded a dike.

A city health department air monitor downwind of the refinery on Friday registered an alarming level of up to 14,000 parts per billion of volatile organic compounds, some carcinogenic, said department chief scientist Loren Raun, and aerial monitoring continued to detect benzene on Monday.

On Sept. 1, Houston registered Texas' worst ozone pollution this year — an average of 95 parts per billion (ppb) over eight hours. It was Harris County's first of four straight days of unhealthy ozone levels, exceeding the EPA standard of 70 ppb.

By volume, most of Harris County's emissions were sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds, which break down to fine particles and ozone that all can cause respiratory problems, especially for people with asthma and emphysema, said Miriam Rotkin-Ellman, a health scientist for environmental group Natural Resources Defense Council.

Of the dozen plants in Harris County reporting storm-related emissions, Exxon Mobil, Chevron Phillips and Shell Oil have been fined or ordered to pay settlements totaling $27.8 million since 2010 for violating federal environmental laws after suits by The Sierra Club and Environment Texas. A federal judge ordered Exxon Mobil in May to pay most of it — $19.9 million — for illegal emissions from its Baytown refinery.

Exxon Mobil is appealing. The other two companies paid, said Philip Hilder, attorney for the environmental groups.

In heavily Latino lower middle-income communities like Pasadena and Galena Park, which sit along the plant and refinery corridor near Houston's seaport, some residents complained of feeling sick during Harvey.

Ruben Basurto, who lives two blocks from a petrochemical shipping terminal and refinery, described major flaring as Harvey hit — the burning off of volatile byproducts of petrochemical manufacture that sends flames soaring from plant stacks. The air reeked of natural gas, he said, driving him and his friends inside.

"It still smelled at midweek, more during the night," said the 33-year-old construction worker.

As the storm closed in, Gov. Greg Abbott decreed the temporary suspension of emissions regulations. The state environmental agency's director said Texas law could exempt refineries and chemical plants from state fines and liability for extraordinary releases resulting from "an act of God, war, strike, riot, or other catastrophe. "

In Galena Park, mothers in a private Facebook group described sickening odors like "sweet gasoline," raw sewage and thick air.

Some in the city of 11,000 with a median household income of $43,000 called 911 but police were too busy to respond, said local environmental activist Juan Flores.

"A lot of people are afraid to talk because their husbands work in the plants," said Flores.

People in the petrochemical corridor should be provided health screening as a next step in Harvey recovery, said Rotkin-Ellman of the environmental group NRDC.

A Harris County pollution control services toxicologist, Latrice Babin, said she was not aware of any special screening.

Sanchez's headaches still hadn't gone away on Wednesday. Nor had the sickening smell, she said.

She wants to see a doctor, but like many in her neighborhood, she said, Sanchez currently has no health insurance.

"I don't even know where I would start."

EPA Chief Pledges to Secure Toxic Sites in Irma's Storm Path

By Jennifer A Dlouhy
September 7, 2017, 6:12 PM CDT
September 7, 2017, 7:54 PM CDT

- Pruitt says staff already securing 80 Superfund sites
- Harvey, Katrina offer lessons on real-time hurricane response

Hurricane Irma on a Collision Course With Florida

The Trump administration is applying lessons from Hurricane Harvey's drenching of southeast Texas as it secures toxic waste sites in the path of Hurricane Irma, U.S. environmental chief Scott Pruitt said.

The Environmental Protection Agency's main goal is to make sure there are "enough people on the ground" to quickly assess the integrity of at-risk chemical sites and respond to needs as the monster storm moves through, Pruitt said. Technical staff are already working to secure about 80 Superfund sites in Irma's path from Miami to North Carolina, including a former pesticide plant, military base and machine shop.

"Operationally, we've tried to make sure we apply the same type of approach we used in Texas," Pruitt, EPA's administrator, said in an interview Thursday. "Because of the area and the amount of population that's affected in Florida, we're trying to be even more aggressive."

The EPA faced some criticism for its response to Hurricane Harvey in Texas, as it was not able to immediately inspect some toxic Superfund sites that were flooded or inaccessible. After chemicals at one plant exploded, spewing fumes into the air, EPA said an initial analysis showed "no high levels of toxic chemicals." Earlier Thursday, local police officers filed a lawsuit against the plant owners, Arkema SA, saying they were sickened by the fumes from the plant.

Nearly 200 EPA personnel were deployed in Texas. The agency already has about 77 people working on Irma related efforts and another seven are on the way.

Back-to-back hurricanes hitting the U.S. threaten to strain the federal government's resources, prompting the Senate to pass a $15.25 billion relief bill Thursday, and renewing a debate about the size and scope of federal agencies. The Trump administration has proposed cutting nearly a third of the EPA's budget for the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1 and culling roughly 3,200 employees from the agency's 15,000-member workforce, a process that has already begun as hundreds of workers accept buyouts.

Earlier Story: Vacant U.S. Posts Hamper Hurricane Aid as Irma Set to Strike

Pruitt stressed the EPA has not been hit by budget reductions yet, as Congress weighs how much to spend on the agency. Both Republican and Democratic lawmakers have signaled they will refuse to make the steep budget cuts President Donald Trump is seeking for EPA.

"Congress is working through the budget as we speak, so there's been no impact in that regard," Pruitt said. "It's more of just simply allocating personnel and prioritizing personnel -- making sure that at the end of the day it's the local officials and the state officials in partnership with the EPA."

EPA chief says ready to further relax fuel standards due to hurricanes

Valerie Volcovici

File Photo: Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt speaks during an interview for Reuters at his office in Washington, U.S., July 10, 2017. REUTERS/Yuri Gripas

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is preparing for Hurricane Irma's landfall on the U.S. East Coast by securing vulnerable toxic waste sites and easing gasoline standards to ensure steady fuel supplies, its chief told Reuters on Thursday.

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt declined to say whether he believed claims by scientists that the second powerful storm to affect the United States in two weeks may have a link to warmer air and water temperatures resulting from climate change.

"The most we can do is help people in these areas by monitoring drinking water and respond to real and tangible issues," he said in a brief telephone interview.

Hurricane Irma is expected to make landfall in Florida as early as Friday after slamming Caribbean islands with 185 mph winds, only days after Hurricane Harvey triggered record flooding in Texas that killed scores of people.

The EPA said has issued waivers on certain federal requirements for the sale, production and blending of gasoline to avoid supply shortfalls in the aftermath of Harvey and as Hurricane Irma approaches Florida.

Pruitt said he spoke with Florida Governor Rick Scott about potentially issuing more waivers on gasoline requirements if the need arises after Irma.

"EPA will grant additional waivers if requested," he said.

He said the agency is also evaluating 80 Superfund toxic waste sites from Florida to North Carolina to identify those at risk of flooding.

The EPA has yet to finish assessing the impact of Harvey on Texas Superfund sites - heavily contaminated former industrial zones - amid widespread flooding. On Saturday, the agency said 13 sites were flooded or damaged, but the full impact on surrounding areas was not immediately clear.

Pruitt said the agency is also continuing to seek additional information about explosions last week at

French chemical company Arkema's flooded plant in Crosby, Texas, which sickened more than a dozen law enforcement personnel and prompted an evacuation of the surrounding area.

Chemical risk database targeted by Congress

CHEMICALS: A federal database on risk is in danger of having its funding cut by Congress

By James Osborne | September 7, 2017

1

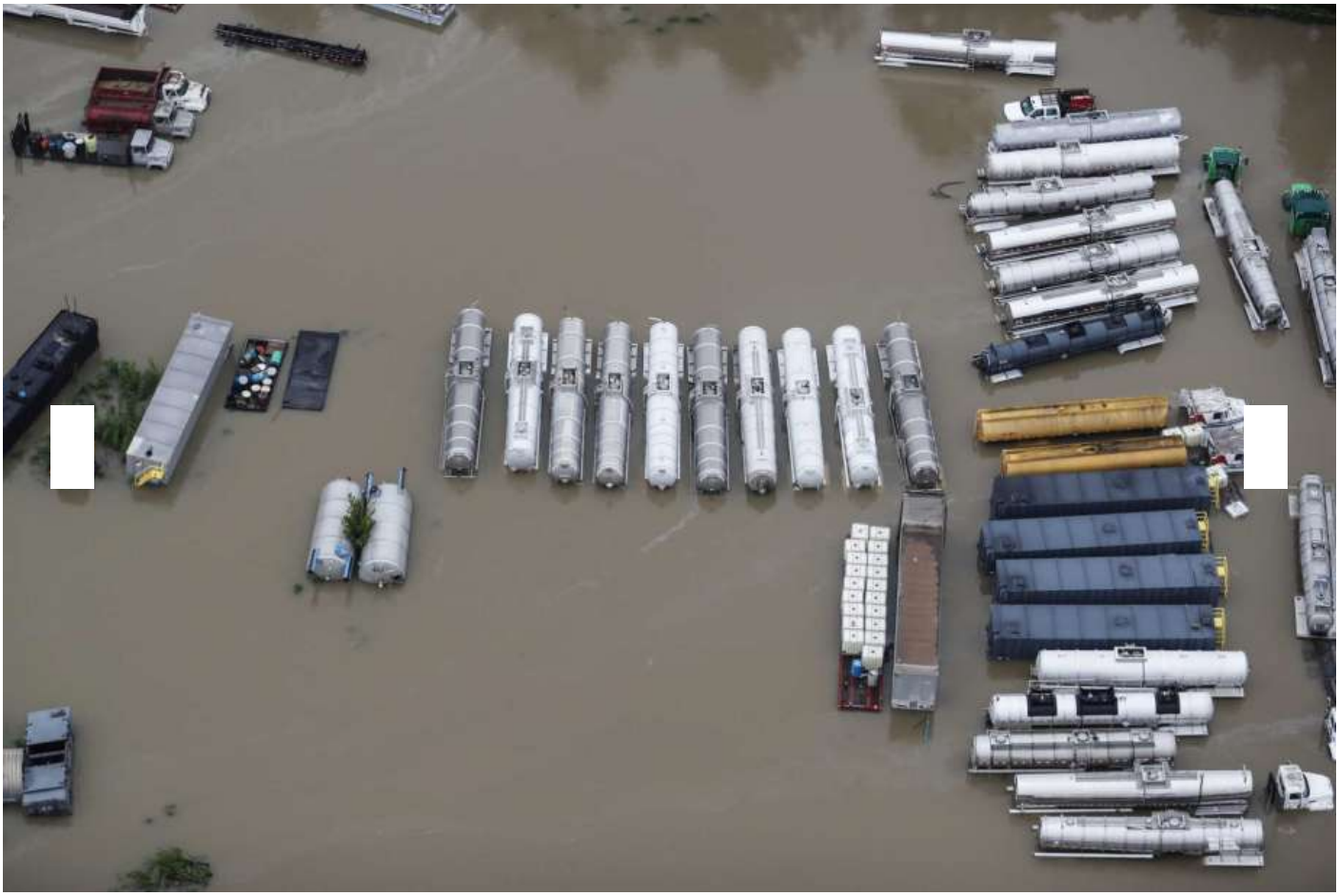


Photo: Brett Coomer, Staff

IMAGE 1 OF 3

These industrial vehicles in Houston were in floodwaters last month from Harvey. The EPA maintains a program called IRIS to assess the health risks of various chemical compounds.

WASHINGTON - When floodwaters come up, seeping into industrial areas that turn out fuel or chemicals, public health officials look to a federal database known simply as IRIS.

Short for Integrated Risk Information System, the Environmental Protection Agency maintains the program to assess the health risks of various chemical compounds and as a go-to encyclopedia for state agencies on their impacts on human populations.

"These are the folks that are there when Corpus Christi, Texas, has a question about an inadvertent contamination of their water supply," Thomas Burke, a public health professor at Johns Hopkins University, testified Wednesday to Congress. "IRIS is an importation database that doesn't just look at cancer and rats."

Now in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey's flooding of the Texas Gulf Coast, the future of that program is falling into question as Congress looks to cut the EPA's budget.

Under President Donald Trump's original budget released earlier this year, the agency would have seen its budget slashed more than 30 percent and IRIS eliminated altogether. But under a House appropriations bill released this summer, the EPA's budget saw a far smaller cut of $528 million - about 6 percent of its 2017 budget - leaving IRIS intact but financially weakened.

The program has long been controversial within the chemical industry, which has criticized the EPA's scientific methods and questioned IRIS's priorities.

"Everybody has a difference of opinion of what degree it needs to change," said Ed Krenik, a lobbyist for the chemical industry.

At a hearing before the House Science, Space and Technology Committee, Republicans echoed those concerns, calling for an

BUSINESS

Harvey could add to oil glut, depress prices

FEMA considers faster way to buy out Houston homes swamped by

Chemical risk database targeted by Congress

overhaul in how IRIS goes about assessing the risk of chemicals that support an industry worth hundreds of billions of dollars a year.

Harvey roundup: Ranchers tally impact on soggy herds

Eli Lilly will slash 3,500 jobs

FEMA looks to buy out homes flooded by Hurricane Harvey

"IRIS assessments are not based on sound science," said Rep. Darin LaHood, R-Ill. "There are multiple instances of the IRIS program relying on outdated or flawed studies."

Republicans pointed to a series of reports by both the Government Accountability Office and the National Academy of Sciences that recommended changes in IRIS's scientific method, following a controversial 2010 assessment that the chemical formaldehyde caused cancer when inhaled.

Advocates for the program, like Burke, maintain that IRIS is addressing those areas of concern and improving its methods.

But James Bus, a toxicologist with the consulting firm Exponent, whose work is supported by the American Chemistry Council, a trade group representing the industry, testified the EPA had a history of reliance on health findings that could not be reproduced and rushing peer reviews of its scientific work.

"IRIS might be going down the right road, but they still have a lot of work ahead of them," Bus said.

James Osborne

Washington Energy Correspondent

EDITORIALS

They warned us, but few listened

Houston must listen to the advocates and experts who predicted the unpredictable.

 | September 7, 2017

1

Photo: Brett Coomer, Staff

A neighborhood is inundated by floodwaters from Harvey near east Interstate 10 on Aug. 29 in Houston. (Brett Coomer / Houston Chronicle)

Who could have predicted the disaster wrought by Hurricane Harvey?

Who could have foreseen that the Addicks Dam would overflow its spillway? Or that dangerous materials from EPA Superfund sites could be washed into floodwaters? Or that chemical companies could keep the public in the dark about toxic risks while their plants burned?

The answer, of course, is that plenty of people saw this coming.

Hydrologists and activists had long warned about how unplanned development would risk routine flooding.

Environmentalists and investigative reporters warned about the toxic threats that loomed in the east end of our city.

Climate scientists warned that a warming planet could bring stronger storms and monsoon-like rains that we experienced less than two weeks back.

How many more floods will it take, how many homes destroyed and lives lost, until Houston stops clinging to a status quo that treats these disasters as an inexorable part of life and starts listening to the people who saw it coming?

Jim Blackburn warned us. As an environmental attorney, he represented the Sierra Club in a 2011 lawsuit against the construction of the Grand Parkway that alleged continued paving of the Katy Prairie would exacerbate runoff into the Addicks and Barker reservoirs and put the dams at risk. He lost that lawsuit.

The 2016 Tax Day floods set a new record at both reservoirs. Harvey forced Addicks to overtop its spillway, a dangerous first-time event. Nearby homes might remain

EDITORIALS

They warned us, but few listened

The right pick for a challenging time

Seeking a new vision after Harvey

Friday letters: Character of Houston, downtown courtrooms,

underwater for weeks.

Parker: The worst is yet to come

David Conrad and Larry Larson warned us. They collaborated on a 1998 "Higher Ground" study that offered recommendations for flood prevention back when we still had the opportunity to implement land use regulations in undeveloped flood zones.

Did our political leaders heed that foreboding message? "They didn't," the duo wrote this week in the Washington Post. "Houston did some buyouts, but repetitive losses continued to mount as development pushed along mostly unfettered."

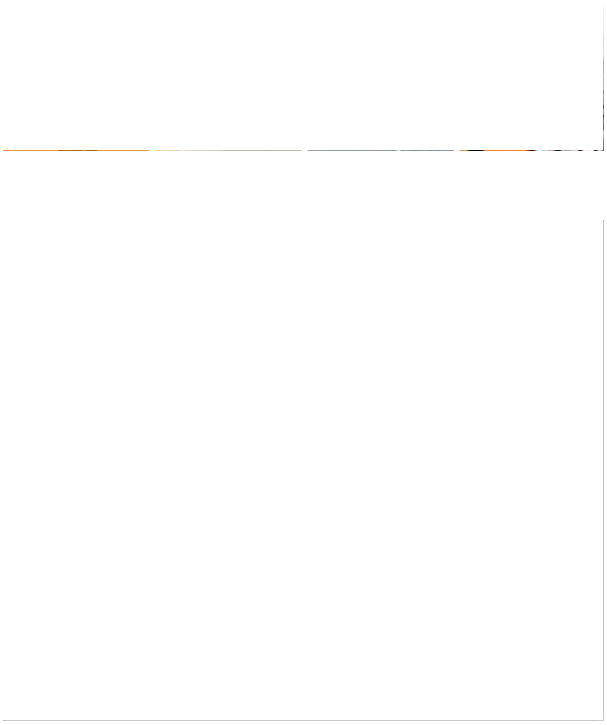
Jackie Young warned us. The executive director of the Texas Health and Environment Alliance was an advocate for a full cleanup of the San Jacinto waste pits long before a storm struck the precariously positioned storage tanks of carcinogenic dioxins. Now it may be too late.

The Houston Air Alliance warned us. The local nonprofit has tried to force transparency on a notoriously opaque chemicals industry. When an Arkema facility caught fire during Harvey, the company refused to reveal the full truth about what dangerous materials might exist at the site. Seven first responders who became ill after the emergency are now suing the company in civil court, and we hope that a criminal investigation will follow.

Harvey was a catastrophe. The Tax Day flood in 2016 was a catastrophe. The Memorial Day flood in 2015 was a catastrophe, and so were the litany of other major flooding events that have struck our city. One-hundred-year floods have become one-year floods. Yet far too many developers, lobbyists and politicians want to turn their backs to the potential death and

destruction. Think of it as a man who survived a series of heart attacks but argues that, since it didn't kill him, there's no reason to stop eating cheeseburgers and fries twice a day.

We need to stop yielding political power to those who insist there's little we can or should do to keep us safe. Because nothing can be further from the truth. Plenty of Houstonians warned us. They've spent years futilely trying to turn their ideas into action, only to see their efforts quashed by a political structure that insists there's no improving upon unregulated concrete, and no avoiding a flood.



This political structure was exemplified by former Harris County Flood Control District Executive Director Mike Talbott, who refused to study global warming and its impact on our region, who dismissed warnings about runoff from a developed Katy Prairie, and denigrated concerns from scientists and conservationists as "anti-development."

Talbott may have left office, but that philosophy of development at any cost remains the status quo around Commissioners Court, City Hall and the state Legislature.

Hydrologists, environmentalists, scientists and activists offered a prescient vision of destruction that went ignored. If Houston wants to rebuild a resilient city, then we must lift those with true foresight out of the political wilderness and put them in proximity to the levers of power.

What lessons will Houston-area officials learn from Harvey? History gives us a clue

> As Houston begins to recover from Harvey, a growing chorus of voices is calling for big policy changes to reduce flood damage from future disasters. Local officials haven't said much about what they might pursue, but history offers some clues.

BY **NEENA SATIJA** SEPT. 8, 2017 8 HOURS AGO

Aerial view of flooding from Tropical Storm Allison in Houston on June 9, 2001.
NOAA

A growing chorus of voices — from scientists to some government officials to members of

the public — say big policy changes need to be made in the Houston region after Hurricane Harvey dumped a record amount of rain there and swamped thousands of homes.

With the recovery process just getting started, local officials haven't said much about what those policy changes might be. And in a statement to The Texas Tribune, Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner's spokesman said Harvey would have flooded the "relatively flat city that is crisscrossed by waterways … regardless of what planning and land usage regulations were in place."

But the Bayou City has been here before. The worst rainstorm to befall an American city in modern history before Harvey was Tropical Storm Allison, which dumped more than 40 inches of rain on Houston in five days, flooding 73,000 residences and 95,000 vehicles. Allison caused $5 billion in damage to Harris County alone — and Harvey's cost is expected to soar well past that level.

Houston and Harris County officials pursued a number of major policy changes after Allison. Some of them had modest success; some were abject failures. Many are likely to come up again after Harvey, on an even bigger scale than before. Here are the big ones:

Buying out homes most likely to flood again

Just months after Allison, Harris County began to pay people to leave their homes — ultimately spending hundreds of millions of dollars of mostly federal money. The county targeted thousands of families who suffered flood damage and lived in 100-year floodplains — areas with at least a 1 percent chance of flooding in a given year. The idea was that it would be cheaper to pay residents to live elsewhere than constantly paying out flood insurance claims.

Experts say the program was a good one, but didn't go far enough. Since Allison, the county's flood control district has purchased about 2,400 homes, but a recent study said that at least 3,300 more should be targeted for immediate buyouts. Even if those homes were bought out, that still leaves tens of thousands in the 100-year floodplain.

Local officials will surely ask for more money to buy out homes after Harvey. But they'll have to depend largely on the generosity of Congress — and if they get more

money, they'll have to convince many Houstonians who haven't been willing take the money and move after previous floods.

The Harris County Flood Control District has already started asking homeowners whether they're interested in buyouts post-Harvey, though no money is available yet.

"Buyouts are on the table … voluntary and involuntary," said Harris County Judge Ed Emmett. "That's got to be an option."

Re-mapping the floodplain

Harris County devoted tens of millions of federal dollars after Tropical Storm Allison to re-map its floodplains. The process took a lot longer than expected, and resulted in numerous lawsuits. But experts say the redrawn maps still don't reflect the true floodplains.

That's partly because the flood maps don't account for what climate scientists say is an increase in the number and frequency of massive rainfall events (Harris County is in the middle of a large study that could result in updating some of those rainfall expectations).

There may be calls to re-map floodplains again after Harvey. But if Texas officials secure the money to do it, it would take years. Meanwhile, experts also say the whole concept of the 100-year floodplain is becoming less and less useful. During Tropical Storm Allison, more than half the homes that flooded were outside the 100-year floodplain; that didn't change during subsequent floods even after the maps were updated.

Restricting building in flood-prone areas

As part of a broad effort to revisit development policies after the devastation of Tropical Storm Allison, in 2006 the city of Houston tried to restrict building in the "floodway" — an area within the floodplain that is at particular risk of being damaged by flooding because it's directly in the central current of floodwaters.

It seemed like a no-brainer to many at the time. Since the mid-1960s — well before people fully understood what floodplains were — a Houston ordinance had technically forbidden building in a floodway. But the policy was riddled with exceptions that led

to thousands of dwellings being built in floodways. So five years after Allison, the city decided to get rid of those exceptions.

The result was a political catastrophe. As the floodplain maps were redrawn after Allison, hundreds of new properties were suddenly in the floodway. That meant their owners could no longer renovate them or build anything new. Property values dropped instantly. A series of lawsuits and a political firestorm pressured the Houston City Council into severely weakening the restrictions two years later.

Today, some members of the public and scientists are mystified that it is still possible to build in the floodway in the city of Houston. But many people who strongly opposed the floodway ordinance are still influential in Houston.

For instance, Paul Bettencourt — now a Republican state senator — was tax assessor for Harris County when the floodway ordinance was adopted, and at the time bitterly complained that the policy would cost the area millions in tax revenue. And Adrian Garcia, then a city councilman who would later become Harris County sheriff, represented many residents who lived in floodways.

Garcia, now a private consultant, said he doesn't regret weakening the restrictions. "The floodway ordinance was just a fraction of the solution," he said. "If we were to take a truly comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach to our flooding and drainage issues, then it could be brought to the table as part of a total package."

Updating old infrastructure

After Allison, federal disaster relief money helped accelerate projects the county was already working on — such as upgrading the infrastructure around the bayous that carry floodwater through and away from Houston. Hundreds of millions of federal and local dollars have already been spent, and Harvey may help secure more money needed to finish these projects.

But many of the bayou upgrades have taken years longer than anticipated, and the damage from Harvey might set them even farther back. Meanwhile, none of this work would prevent flooding from a massive event like Harvey. Flood control officials say it wouldn't even protect homes from events of a much smaller scale than Harvey, like the 2016 Tax Day floods.

Harvey has widely been referred to as at least a 500-year flood — a disaster with just a .2 percent chance of occurring in any given year. Flood control officials say protecting neighborhoods surrounding all of Harris County's bayous from just a 100-year flood would cost $25 billion.

Currently, the county has been spending about $80 million a year on these upgrades. At that rate it would take 400 years to get the job done. Harvey relief dollars may increase that level of spending, but it's still an daunting task.

On top of public works projects around bayous, the region has also tried to improve its dismal drainage system. Former Mayor Annise Parker's "Rebuild Houston" initiative, an $8 billion program approved by Houston voters in 2010, called for a dedicated drainage fee to address the problem. But the fee and the program have been beset with controversy and lawsuits.

Bettencourt, the Republican state senator, said he led opposition to Rebuild Houston because many of its initial promises were abandoned. He added that much of the money being collected in drainage fees is not actually being used for drainage.

"There's clearly a need to take what happened with Harvey and figure out really how to prevent any mistakes that were made … [and] more importantly, find the lessons learned that people knew in the past," Bettencourt said. "It's just time that we collect everything we've learned, everything that we saw and do the best to implement fixes for future generations of Texans."

Kiah Collier contributed reporting.

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- Since Hurricane Harvey first hit the Texas coast on Aug. 25, Texans have had to come to terms with widespread damage caused by the storm. Take a look at just some of what Texans are dealing with. [Full story]

HURRICANE NEWS AND STORM TRACKING

Hurricane Irma downgraded to Category 4 storm, still 'extremely dangerous'

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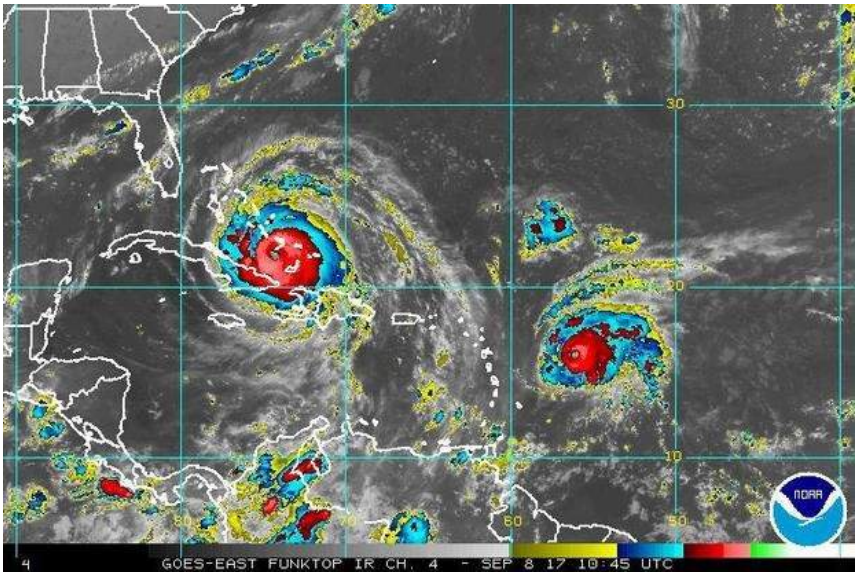
Updated on September 8, 2017 at 6:54 AM
Posted on September 8, 2017 at 6:28 AM



Hurricane Irma was downgraded to a Category 4 storm early Friday morning (Sept. 8), according to the National Hurricane Center. However, forecasters said the storm remains "dangerous" and "extremely powerful." (Image via NOAA)

By Carlie Kollath Wells, cwells@nola.com,
NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune

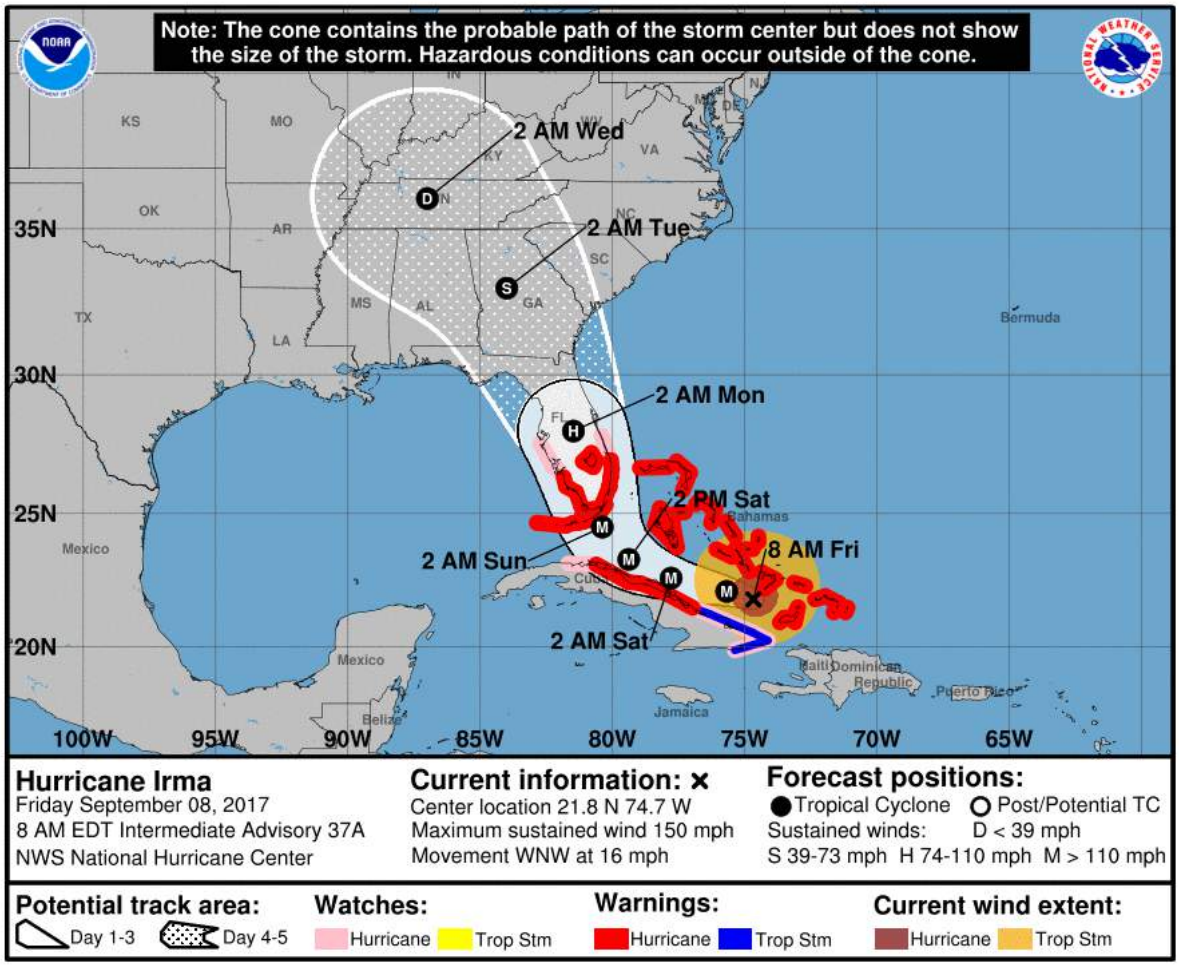
Hurricane Irma was downgraded to a Category 4 storm early Friday morning (Sept. 8), according to the National Hurricane Center. However, forecasters said the storm remains "dangerous" and "extremely powerful."

Hurricane Irma is expected to hit Florida this weekend. (latest track)

As of 7 a.m., Hurricane Irma was 80 miles northeast of Cabo Lucrecia, Cuba, and about 450 miles southeast of Miami. It was moving northwest at 16 mph.

It had maximum sustained winds of 150 mph. Category 5 storms have winds of 157 mph or greater on the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Wind Scale (read more). Forecasters said some fluctuations in intensity are likely during the next day or two, but Irma is forecast to remain a "powerful" category 4 hurricane during the next couple of days.

The National Hurricane Center expects the storm to turn toward northwest by late Saturday. On the forecast track, the eye of Irma should move near the north coast of Cuba and the central Bahamas on Friday and Saturday. It is expected to be near the Florida Keys and the southern Florida peninsula on Sunday morning.



Hurricane Irma continues to head to Florida. Here's the storm's five-day track, as of 7 a.m. Friday. (Image via National Hurricane Center) (Carlie Kollath Wells)

Hurricane-force winds extend up to 70 miles from the center and tropical-storm-force winds extend up to 185 miles.

The National Hurricane Center is warning of a "life-threatening storm surge," in addition to "large and destructive waves." In the Florida Keys, a storm surge of 5 to 10 feet is possible. In the Turks and Caicos Islands and southeastern and central Bahamas, a storm surge of 15 to 20 feet is possible.

Hurricanes Are Sweeping The Atlantic. What's The Role Of Climate Change?

September 8, 20177:19 AM ET

CHRISTOPHER JOYCE

In this GOES-16 geocolor satellite image taken Thursday, the eye of Hurricane Irma (left) is just north of the island of Hispaniola, with Hurricane Jose (right) in the Atlantic Ocean.

NOAA/AP

Hurricane Irma is hovering somewhere between being the most- and second-most powerful hurricane recorded in the Atlantic. It follows Harvey, which dumped trillions of gallons of water on South Texas. And now, Hurricane Jose is falling into step behind Irma, and gathering strength.

Is this what climate change scientists predicted?

In a word, yes. Climate scientists such as Michael Mann at Penn State says, "The science is now fairly clear that climate change will make stronger storms stronger." Or wetter.

Scientists are quick to point out that Harvey and Irma would have been big storms before the atmosphere and oceans started warming dramatically about 75 years ago. But now storms are apt to grow bigger. That's because the oceans and atmosphere are, on average, warmer now than they used to be. And heat is the fuel that takes garden-variety storms and supercharges them.

THE TWO-WAY

Gas In The Tank, Cafecito In Hand: Floridians Prepare For Irma

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicted that the Atlantic hurricane season this year would be big. They said the most

likely scenario would be five to nine hurricanes and three to five major hurricanes, which is above the long-term average.

Some of their reasoning is based on climate change. The eastern tropical Atlantic ocean is the fuel tank of hurricanes, if you will, and big parts of the sea surface have been between .5 and 1 degree Celsius warmer than average this summer. Now, the Atlantic goes through normal cycles of warming and cooling that have nothing to do with climate change, such as in response the El Nino and La Nina weather cycles. But this year neither cycle is active.

THE TWO-WAY

Hurricane Irma Leaves Devastation Of 'Epic Proportions' In Caribbean

And whether or not Irma was emboldened by climate change, what's more telling are hurricane trends. Big hurricanes in the Pacific as well as the Atlantic appear to be happening more often and are packing more punch than normal.

This composite image shows Hurricane Irma's path as it moved into the warm waters of the western Atlantic. Sea surface temperatures are high this year.

NASA/NOAA

Climate scientist Kevin Trenberth from the National Center for Atmospheric Research explains: "Previous very active (hurricane) years were 2005 and 2010," he says, and along with 2017, they experienced warm Atlantic ocean temperatures. "So this sets the stage. So the overall trend is global warming from human activities."

It's worth noting that there are other things that made Irma big that have no clear association with climate change. Vertical wind shear in the hurricane "nursery" region of the Atlantic are weak this year. Strong wind shear at the right altitude can in essense

"behead" a hurricane as it forms, so Irma has free rein to build. There's also a long-term cycle in Atlantic — the Atlantic Multi-Decadel Oscillation — that affects hurricane-forming conditions. Since 1995, the AMO is in the "on" position for good hurricane conditions, and in fact the period since then has been quite active for storms and hurricanes.

So, as with Harvey, these superstorms have always happened due to natural causes, but the underlying conditions in the oceans and atmosphere have primed the pump. You don't need much effort now to turn a trickle into a gusher.

Researchers warn of high bacteria levels in Clear Lake floodwaters

By Mihir Zaveri Published 6:43 pm, Thursday, September 7, 2017

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University of Houston-Clear Lake researchers have found staggering levels of dangerous E. coli and other fecal bacteria in Hurricane Harvey floodwaters in the Clear Lake watershed.

The amount of bacteria found by researchers in some cases was 100 times those set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for recreational water use.

How sick and what sicknesses people could face by coming into contact with the contaminated floodwaters depends on a number of factors, including how long one was exposed to the water, the presence of open wounds, and the source of the contamination.

It is unclear where this bacteria came from, said Michael LaMontagne, a microbiology professor at the university.

"Identifying the source of the contamination matters greatly in terms of the health risk, knowing whether the source of the indicated bacteria is human feces or sewage rather than from pets, livestock or wildlife," LaMontagne said.

Severe storms and floods pose widespread public health threats. Area hospitals already have reported an uptick in patients with skin infections from coming into contact with contaminated floodwaters.

Texas A&M researchers found similar contamination levels last week. Floodwater samples from the Cypress area were found to contain 125 times the E. coli level considered safe for swimming, and 15 times higher than acceptable levels for wading.

As of Thursday afternoon, more than 20 communities across Harris County still faced warnings to boil their water before consumption or other use. The entire city of Beaumont has been without water for days; city officials there said Thursday they would lift a boil-water notice after flushing water lines.

In Clear Lake, the findings by LaMontagne and other researchers were part of a long-standing monitoring project of the water quality there.

LaMontagne said, generally, water in the area does have high levels of contaminants, but he had not analyzed the data further.

He said that the researchers had submitted a $30,000 proposal to the National Science Foundation to further analyze the samples collected in the aftermath of Harvey to determine their source.

That proposal is pending.

"We plan to complete that analysis if we receive funding, within about a month," LaMontagne said.

LaMontagne said collected samples along the banks of Clear Creek on Aug. 30 as floodwaters from Harvey drained into the waterway.

All eyes are on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as an important deadline approaches to enact new air quality standards for San Antonio and other cities. And the Trump administration may play a wild card, the state's top air quality regulator said.

The EPA is expected to make its national ambient air quality standards designations effective on Oct. 1, under which S[illegible]o be classified as a "marginal nonattainment" city. Such status would affect transportation p[illegible]way funding, and it would require new or expanding manufacturers to enact tougher air pollution controls.

David Brymer, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality's air quality division… more

SERGIO CHAPA | SABJ

Multiple scenarios could play out with the EPA, said David Brymer, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality's air quality division director, during a Tuesday presentation to the San Antonio Manufacturers Association. The federal agency can either enact the designations, delay them nationwide, or enact designations for some cities and delay them for others.

"The bottom line is that San Antonio could be designated as a nonattainment city as early as Oct. 1," Brymer told the crowd. "I believe it's unlikely that the EPA will delay that designation."

> The San Antonio Business Journal and the city of San Antonio's office of sustainability will hold a forum on air quality standards as part of the Breathe Today. SA Tomorrow. campaign. The forum will be from 10:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Norris Conference Center, 618 NW Loop 410. The speakers for the forum include San Antonio Mayor Ron Nirenberg, Alamo Area Council of GovernmentsExecutive Director Diane Rath, LyondellBassell Environmental Issues Manager Rohit Sharmaand Texas Aggregate and Concrete Association President Rich Szecsy. For information on the forum, click here.

Under its 2015 guidelines, the EPA lowered the acceptable levels for ground-level ozone from 75 parts per billion to 70 parts per billion. Based on daily air samples, San Antonio averages 73 parts per billion — in compliance with the

EPA's current standard but in violation of the pending one.

In a September 2016 letter to the EPA, Texas Gov. Gregg Abbottrecommended that Bexar County be listed as one 21Texas counties in violation of the new standard. If the EPA had planned to deviate from Abbott's recommendations, it would have sent Bexar County officials a letter in June. Brymer said the EPA never sent such a letter, meaning that the nonattainment designation for Bexar County is coming.

Regardless of when or how the Trump administration handles the designations, Brymer said the TCEQ will respond appropriately and continue its state-funded programs to combat air pollution. Under the TCEQ's Texas Emissions Reduction Program, or TERP, the agency gives companies rebates to switch to electric vehicles or alternative fuels.

In the San Antonio area, some 534 companieshave received grants from TERP's diesel emissions reduction incentive program to replace more than 1,000 heavy-duty diesel engines with cleaner ones — resulting in the removal of more than 10,500 tons of smog-causing pollutants from the air.

"Why the focus on heavy-duty diesel engines? That's because those things can last 20 to 30 years," Brymer said. "So accelerated turnover there helps air quality significantly."

And the TCEQ is not acting alone. CPS Energy, San Antonio's city-owned utility company, is expected to take its coal-fired Deely Power Plant offline next year. The latest TCEQ data shows that the power plant accounted for 4.6 percent of the city's nitrous oxide emissions in 2014.

Meanwhile, the Alamo Area Council of Governments has been tasked with monitoring the region's air quality and developing reduction and outreach programs to improve it. If and when San Antonio is designated as a nonattainment city, AACOG's air improvement resources executive committee will have three years to develop a plan to improve air quality.

Capitol Aggregates Inc., Alamo Cement Co., Martin Marietta Materials Inc. (NYSE: MLM), Cemex (NYSE: CX), the South Texas Energy & Economic Roundtable and the Texas Aggregates and Concrete Association have pledged to donate a total of $60,000 to help AACOG create a regional emissions inventory that will provide an accurate snapshot of air pollution.

"We are very fortunate in this community that we have some great corporate citizens who really are sensitive to the health and well-being of the region," AACOG Executive Diane Rath said following the donation. "Particularly as a community, we always remember that the only reason we got Toyota was because Dallas was in nonattainment. So we know firsthand the benefits of being in attainment, and I think that's why it is so important to us."

Power plant rule repeal announcement likely this fall: EPA

BY DEVIN HENRY - 09/07/17 03:12 PM EDT 94

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Federal officials expect to finalize their review of the Obama administration's climate rule for power plans this fall, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said Thursday in a court filing.

President Trump in March ordered the EPA to review and consider repealing the Obama administration's Clean Power Plan, which sets carbon reduction targets for states to apply to their energy sectors. The EPA is widely expected to formally order the rule off the books at the end of its review.

The agency has submitted its Clean Power Plan proposal to the Office of Management and Budget's regulations office for review. Once it returns to the EPA, the agency said in its court filing, "the administrator will sign the proposed rule and EPA will send it to the Office of the Federal Register" for a public comment period.

> "At this time, EPA expects that the administrator will sign the proposed rule in the fall of 2017," the filing said.
> The Clean Power Plan was the cornerstone environmental regulation of the Obama administration. The rule, which the Supreme Court stayed in early 2016, would require the U.S. electricity sector to cut its carbon dioxide emissions by up to 32 percent, from 2005 levels, by 2030.

Supporters consider the rule an important step toward tackling climate change-causing carbon emissions. But opponents, including conservatives and the fossil fuel industry, say it is restricting and could hurt businesses' bottom lines.

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt sued against the rule while he was attorney general of Oklahoma and says he considers it to be an illegal regulation. Trump has made repealing the rule a priority.

"I am taking an historic step to lift the restrictions on American energy, to reverse government intrusion and to cancel job-killing regulations," Trump said when he signed his executive order in March.

Monsanto says Arkansas plant board distorts dicamba

By Stephen Steed
This article was published today at 4:30 a.m.

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Monsanto on Thursday criticized the state Plant Board, the work of weed scientists and a task force of volunteers that recently recommended that dicamba herbicides be banned for in-crop use next year.

In separate and different letters to Gov. Asa Hutchinson and Terry Walker, director of the state Plant Board, Monsanto officials criticized nearly all aspects of the state's response the past two growing seasons to complaints that dicamba has harmed thousands of acres of soybeans, other food crops and ornamental plants not tolerant of the chemical.

In letters and a 33-page "petition" to state regulators, Monsanto said:

• The Plant Board, a division of the state Department of Agriculture, was "arbitrary and capricious" last year in refusing to allow Monsanto's new dicamba-based herbicide into the Arkansas market and again, in July, when it instituted an emergency 120-day ban on the sale and use of all dicamba products.

• Results of tests by weed scientists with the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture into dicamba's tendency to move off target were an "outlier" of tests performed by the company.

• The dicamba task force, which met twice last month before recommending an April 15 cutoff date for spraying dicamba next year, "ignored" evidence favorable to Monsanto. An April 15 cutoff date would make meaningless new dicamba herbicides intended for crops once plants have emerged.

The company said it would "seek judicial review" if its concerns aren't resolved.

This summer, regulators in more than 20 states have received some 2,300 complaints of possible damage to soybeans and other crops not dicamba-tolerant. Nearly 1,000 of those complaints were filed in Arkansas, mostly in Mississippi, Crittenden and Craighead counties, leading to the July 11 ban. A weed scientist with the University of Missouri put soybean damage alone at 3.1 million acres across the nation.

The problems have prompted the federal Environmental Protection Agency to look again at the conditional, two-year registration it gave Monsanto last year for its new dicamba herbicide.

Monsanto is being sued in federal courts in Arkansas and Missouri, with the herbicide's alleged volatility being a central claim. The lawsuits also say Monsanto began selling dicamba-tolerant cotton in 2015 and dicamba-tolerant soybeans before the EPA had approved any of the new dicamba herbicides.

MONSANTO'S AMBITIONS

The stakes for Monsanto are high.

The company said recently that it plans to have its dicamba-tolerant soybeans on some 55 million acres -- half of the nation's soybean market -- next year and eventually on 250 million acres around the world. The company also is investing nearly $1 billion to expand a plant in Luling, La., to manufacture dicamba.

Monsanto developed dicamba-tolerant cotton and soybeans to help farmers combat pigweed and other crop nuisances that have developed resistance to glyphosate, commonly known as Roundup, a herbicide also manufactured by Monsanto.

The company has said its new dicamba herbicide, Xtendimax with VaporGrip, is 90 percent less volatile than older formulations of dicamba. Monsanto also allowed BASF and DuPont to market the newer, less-volatile dicamba herbicides. Until the July 11 ban, BASF's Engenia was the only dicamba allowed for in-crop use in Arkansas.

The Plant Board voted late last year to not allow the new Monsanto chemical because the company had refused to let state scientists study the herbicide for off-target movement, allowing instead only a study of its effectiveness against weeds. The board said at the time that it has long been its policy to not approve chemicals until those UA studies had been done.

That decision was among several made in Arkansas that wasn't based on law, Scott Partridge, Monsanto's vice president for global strategy, said Thursday by telephone, noting that Arkansas is the only state to not allow the Monsanto product this year and the only state to ban the use of other dicambas in midseason.

A 33-page "petition" to the Plant Board requests that the panel end the current ban, change pre-ban restrictions that allowed only Engenia in the state, and allow all EPA-approved, in-crop herbicides into the Arkansas market.

The Plant Board next meets Sept. 21 in its regular quarterly meeting, where it also will hold a public hearing on whether any of the new dicamba herbicides should be allowed next year and to consider the April 15 cutoff date recommended by the task force.

"Any recommendations and regulations need to be based on science, not politics and emotion," Partridge said.

THE VOLATILITY ISSUE

Weed scientists in Arkansas, Missouri and Tennessee have said volatility is a major cause of problems, citing tests this summer showing that large-scale spraying of dicamba across tens of thousands of acres on hot, humid days can cause the herbicide to vaporize and move miles away to susceptible crops.

Monsanto disputes that volatility of the new herbicides played a major role in this summer's problems.

Partridge on Thursday echoed statements all summer by other Monsanto representatives that physical drift by wind, errors by applicators, or the use of other dicamba herbicides illegal for over-the-top spraying caused most of the problems. "This tool is too important to not have it available to all farmers," Partridge said, adding problems can be resolved through "education and training."

Regarding Monsanto's claims that farmers used illegal formulations of dicamba or made other errors, David Wildy, a Mississippi County farmer and task force member, said, "They're making a lot of allegations that they can't back up, and they're throwing their own customers under the bus."

"They have no way of knowing that," Wildy said. "I have no respect for a company that does that. We as a task force did the right thing. We listened to their side, we listened to the university people and we made the proper decision -- to just step back and stop the use of dicamba until we figure out as a state what to do."

A spokesman for the UA Division of Agriculture declined to comment until officials have had time to read Monsanto's documents.

Shawn Peebles of Augusta, a task force member and farmer with 1,500 acres of organic vegetables, voted for the April 15 cutoff date.

"Monsanto has invested a lot of money in its dicamba technology, and a lot more is at stake, but I hope the governor and legislators will support the April 15 cutoff date," Peebles said.

Peebles, a member of a U.S. Department of Agriculture panel on organic farming, agreed that the tests by state weed scientists didn't match those of Monsanto. "The talk the whole time was on dicamba damage -- in South Dakota," Peebles said of a meeting this week of the group in Washington, D.C. "That shows it's a nationwide issue, that it's a volatility issue."

Water testing continues in Carrizozo after sulfate alarm

Dianne L Stallings, Ruidoso News Published 12:59 p.m. MT Sept. 7, 2017

Town officials face tough decisions for short and long-term solutions

(Photo: Ruidoso News/Polly Chavez)

Testing of water in the Carrizozo community system for high levels of sulfates continued this week, but the mayor said records from 1996, indicate sulfates were a problem 20 years ago. The difference was that back then, the high level was mitigated by the mixing of water from the Bonito River.

With the river and the lake that feeds it out of commission for the past six years in the aftermath of a massive wildfire, the town may not see any water from that source to mix with water from the two city wells until 2019 or 2020, Mayor Rick Hyatt said.

Residents of Carrizozo were warned by city officials last Friday that sulfate readings in the water were nearly double desired levels. Although sulfate, essentially salt, is not a regulated substance and is not considered life-threatening, high levels can cause diarrhea and dehydration. Hyatt ordered a 6,000-gallon tanker of fresh water and people took advantage of the free water at town hall this week. Deliveries of jugs of water also are expected, Hyatt said Thursday. The municipal water system can be used to wash dishes, clothing and vehicles, and is acceptable for adult cattle.

Since that first day, Hyatt has been working with officials from the Ruidoso field office of the New Mexico Environment Department to determine the cause of the elevated readings, along with discussing short-term and long-term solutions.

Carrizozo Mayor Rick Hyatt, second from right, confers with officials from Lincoln County and from state environment and water agencies. *(Photo: Ruidoso News/Polly Chavez)*

Wednesday, an informal meeting occurred at the mayor's business with John Pijawka, NMED District IV field officer compliance officer; Joseph C. Savage, surface water rule administrator with the NMED; Lincoln County Emergency Services Director Joe Kenmore; and Fred Black of the New Mexico Rural Water Association.

"We have had a tremendous support structure provided through all the different state and federal agencies," Hyatt said. "We've had nothing but fantastic professionals showing up and coming to work, not just sit there and do the political things. These folks are here to ask the right questions, provide the support and help come up with an intelligent solution. We haven't run up against any walls at all and that's something you don't get to say in many situations."

“We’ve dealt with a long list of state and federal officials and are doing localized tests through the town and in people’s homes to determine exactly what might be additionally concentrating the sulfates,” he said. “We don’t expect to find anything different. What we’re looking to see is if parts of the city are better or worse to determine if some areas are being affected more greatly by what just comes out of the well, to get a better picture of the entire scenario.”

Samples are being pulled from 30 different sites, he said. The system serves 586 households.

“Those results are going directly to the lab today,” Hyatt said. “As soon as they are pulled, we have someone making a hot run to Albuquerque. Those results will give a better understanding of what we’ve got as far as saturation.”

Pijawka found historical data that showed in 1996, the town was having the same issue, the mayor said.

“The rub is, it was being diluted by the use of Bonito River water, and that dropped the sulfates down incredibly,” Hyatt said. “The sulfate levels in 1996 were 490 plus (milligrams per liter) and when diluted with the Bonito water, it dropped to an acceptable level. The bigger question is how long before the Bonito River comes back on.”

The lake is owned by the city of Alamogordo, which is responsible for removing the excess ash and other sediments washed into the body of water after the fire. The river surface water from the lake tested at 101 mg/L for sulfates compared to 500 mg/L for the groundwater out of the two Carrizozo wells. If they were mixed, the level would fall under the 250 mg/L limit the federal Environmental Protection Agency recommends for drinking water, the mayor noted.

But that wait could be until 2019 or 2020, based on Alamogordo’s time table, he said.

“We are looking at temporary solutions, even as simple as a (small) reverse osmosis (system) at town hall to dispense drinking water to people with their jugs,” he said, “That would reduce the cost, not having to put in an RO plant. But again, it is dependent on whether the river comes into play.”

Installation and operation of a full RO plant would be expensive, and the town also would be faced with how to dispose of the by-product produced from the treatment, Hyatt said. “It’s a difficult decision,” he said.

He pointed out that the NMED website states that 500 mg/L or less is acceptable for calves, and less than 1,000 mg/L for cattle.

“The EPA recommends not going above 250 mg/L and established 500 mg/L to prevent loose stools or diarrhea,” Hyatt said. “We’re sitting at 500 mg/L. Is that acceptable? That became the lively discussion Wednesday. We’ve gone over and hovered right below it for 20 years and I guess for some living here long enough, they have adapted. But when we have people coming through town, tourists and visitors coming in, how are we going to attract new residents with a water system that causes diarrhea?”

Carrizozo has one of the lower sulfate levels in the state, the mayor said.

“Why is it we’re the ones trumpeting the (alarm)? Why has no one done it before?” he asked. “It may be the solution for Carrizozo residents that if they don’t want sulfate water, to go to village hall with a bucket until the river is back on line.”

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By Tim Morris, Columnist, tmorris@nola.com,
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I don't know how they make both ends of a bridge match up in the middle or even how they paint the white lines to keep the lanes relatively even. But I do think I would spot the problem with paving over storm drains and catch basins.

But that's apparently what better engineering minds than mine allowed to happen along some Uptown streets as the Army Corps of Engineers worked to complete -- get this -- major federal drainage projects.

Times-Picayune reporter Richard Rainey reports that the news, made public Thursday (Sept. 7) by Councilman Jason Williams, left "city officials scrambling to cast blame and discover who must clean them up."

"This is a huge issue for us," said Jeff Hebert, Mayor Mitch Landrieu's chief administrative officer.

I would hope so. Although, again, my street engineering and infrastructure knowledge is severely lacking, I'm pretty sure that those recently repaired vacuum trucks can't suck through pavement.

City Council District A candidate Drew Ward raised the issue with the Army Corps of Engineers and others back in August, according to emails, and said he eventually got the attention of Councilman Williams at a recent forum.

Williams told the council that newly rolled asphalt was partially or fully blocking some drains along Napoleon and Jefferson avenues between St. Charles and South Claiborne avenues. Those streets are being redone as major parts of the federal Southeast Louisiana Urban Flood Control Program, which is managed by the Army Corps of Engineers.

So, maybe between getting the Sewerage & Water Board to do what it's supposed to and putting out the occasional electrical fire at the city's pump station turbines, the Landrieu administration could, as Williams suggested, have the corps repair the blocked drains before the city faces another catastrophic flood.

One problem, however, is that the administration isn't sure who will be responsible for fixing this embarrassing problem. Interim Public Works Director Dani Galloway -- the former director, Mark Jernigan, got the boot for not cleaning the catch basins -- said she is looking for any documentation Jernigan had signed off on the street work done by the corps' contractors.

If Jernigan did approve the work, it becomes the city's responsibility to fix the drains under its arrangement with the corps over SELA, Galloway said. If the city never approved the completed work, then the corps would have to fix them.

It will be just our luck that signing papers was something that Jernigan actually did. You cannot make this stuff up.

Tim Morris is an opinions columnist at NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune. He can be reached at tmorris@nola.com. Follow him on Twitter @tmorris504.